

MOVIES

Ten years ago this month, President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas, Texas. The question of who killed him is still open for many who find the Warren Commission's conclusion that Lee Harvey Oswald was the lone assassin even more difficult to swallow than New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison's wild charges of a conspiracy that, in retrospect, becomes less unthinkable with every new Watergate headline. *Executive Action*, scheduled for release this month, promises to fan all the doubts—and might even rouse the public to demand that the investigation be officially reopened. In the film, Burt Lancaster, the late Robert Ryan and Will Geer all portray wealthy right-wingers who successfully mastermind a conspiracy to kill President Kennedy. *Executive Action* will probably be compared to *Z*, yet it differs from the Costa-Gavras shocker in at least one significant aspect: *Z*'s conspirators were known to be real. The men who made *Executive Action* readily admit that the conspiracy they've depicted may not be literally true, yet they relate to it as approximate fact. Says executive producer Edward Lewis, "What the nation has been told about John F. Kennedy's death is patently false. In *Executive Action*, we offer a far more reasonable and plausible explanation for what happened in Dealey Plaza on November 22, 1963."

Spoken like a true wild-eyed radical. Ed Lewis, however, is one of Hollywood's

most respected film executives, and in the past he has produced such popular entertainments as *Spartacus*, *Grand Prix* and *Seven Days in May* (which featured Lancaster as an Air Force general who unsuccessfully attempts a military overthrow of the U.S. Government). Lewis—a short, stocky and forceful man—is not known to be particularly political, but his newest production may turn out to be the most politically unsettling movie ever made in America.

Why did he decide to make it? The idea, he told us, hadn't entered his mind until early 1971, when actor Donald Sutherland asked him to read a script he'd purchased from Mark Lane (the author of *Rush to Judgment*) and playwright Donald Freed. "The screenplay knocked me over," Lewis recalled. He had its main contentions carefully researched and, after finding no conflict between Lane's theories and the documented facts, he bought the script and persuaded Dalton Trumbo, the dean of American scenarists, to do a rewrite. When Trumbo completed his screenplay, a copy was quickly sent to Lancaster, who had a difficult time deciding whether or not to appear in the film. Lancaster told Lewis: "It's more than just another movie—much more." After several months of fretting (and reading books about the assassination sent to him by Trumbo), Lancaster finally told Lewis to count him in.

Veteran director David Miller, whose screen credits include *Lonely Are the Brave*, *Sudden Fear* and *Captain Newman, M.D.*, eagerly accepted the chance to call the camera shots on *Executive Action*. "But it was an emotionally harrowing experience," he told us while working on the film's final cut at a downtown Los Angeles film laboratory. "We filmed the entire assassination sequence—it's seen through a rifle scope—here in Griffith Park, using doubles for the Kennedys, John Connally and Mrs. Connally. It's hard to convey just what we were feeling, but it was a strange and very troubling day for us all. There were many days like that."

To Miller, the most fascinating character in the entire affair was Lee Harvey Oswald. "The deeper you delve into his life, the less you find you know about him," he said. "He'd be pro-Castro one week, anti-Castro the next. I think it's obvious he was being used. In fact, in an interview in the Dallas jail just before his death, Oswald said just that: 'I'm a patsy.' We portrayed him that way in *Executive Action*."

Why, we asked coproducers Gary Horowitz and Dan Bessie, have American moviemakers shied away from making films as politically sensitive as this one? "It's very simple," said Horowitz. "Nobody thinks they make money." Added Bessie: "*Executive Action* marks the first

time an important man in the American film industry—Ed Lewis—has said 'f--- it' to that kind of thinking and has gone on to make a film of major political import. And he's done it for less than \$500,000."

Finally we spoke with Dalton Trumbo, the only writer ever to win both an Academy Award (for *The Brave One*, written under the pseudonym Robert Rich in 1957 while he was still one of the black-listed Hollywood Ten) and a National Book Award (for *Johnny Got His Gun*, in 1939). Trumbo's health has declined severely, but he was pleased to talk about the screenplay he'd initially refused to write. Sitting in the study of his house high above Sunset Boulevard, Trumbo told us: "I didn't want to work on *Executive Action*, because, by and large, I'm suspicious of conspiracy theories—they're just a convenient way of explaining history. But such theories always make for fascinating reading, and Lewis sent me a pile of books. By the time I'd gone through eight or ten of them—particularly Josiah Thompson's marvelous study of the ballistics—I was convinced that at least two gunmen must have committed the Kennedy murder. Two gunmen acting together, of course, would constitute a conspiracy—and because such an undertaking isn't easy to pull off, a great many other men probably were involved. I have since discovered that even Lyndon Johnson thought J.F.K.'s death was the result of a conspiracy. He told that to Walter Cronkite in the course of those three one-hour interviews conducted shortly before he died. But L.B.J. had the right to approve what CBS could show and he cut that part out."

Just a few facts concerning Oswald's rifle, Trumbo continued, would be enough to convince any objective observer that it couldn't have been the assassination weapon. Said Trumbo: "The Mannlicher-Carcano rifle he used was known in the Italian army as the 'gun that never gets angry,' because it almost never shot straight enough to harm anyone. Oswald's had a cheap scope on it that was especially difficult to operate. Ed Lewis hired experts to test the Mannlicher-Carcano with that particular scope, and they found that although three shots could be fired at a stationary target within the five and a half seconds in which the assassination took place, the additional time necessary to adjust the scope to sight a moving target would rule out Oswald's rifle completely."

Trumbo recalled his own reaction to the news of November 22, 1963. "I was in Rome in my apartment," he said, "and when my secretary telephoned and told me, 'President Kennedy has just been killed in Dallas,' all I answered was 'Oh.' I still can't really analyze why I wasn't shocked, but perhaps it's because I've seen so much violence in this country."